

ROYAL SAGA: *Grace of Monaco*

Will the fairy tale princess charm Cannes?

By Gautaman Bhaskaran

Incredible as it may sound, the Cannes Film Festival finds movies, especially openers that are relevant to the region. Last May, it kicked off with Baz Luhrmann's *The Great Gatsby*. The director's *Moulin Rouge* had opened the Festival some years ago to favourable reviews, which I did not quite agree with. I called it a film without soul.

But there was a more important reason other than Luhrmann's track

record, a reason which drove Cannes to even overlook the premiere rule. The Festival had nearly always opened with a work which would be seen for the first time. Anywhere. *The Great Gatsby*, however, had its North American screening five days before the Festival began! And what was it that clichéd this deal for *The Great Gatsby*?

Francis Scott Fitzgerald — whose novel inspired *The Great Gatsby* — wrote the final chapters in a villa

close to the Festival venue, and some of the sounds and smells of the French Riviera could be found not just in the book, but also in the movie.

Festival Director Thierry Fremaux tweeted then: "Fitzgerald in his time essentially invented the Cote d'Azur (French Riviera, where Cannes lies), and the author and his wife were amorous fans of The Carlton Hotel in Cannes as well as the Hotel du Cap in nearby Antibes." Carlton today plays host to the most renowned film celebrities attending the 12-day Festival.

This year, Cannes will open on

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May 14 with Olivier Dahan's *Grace of Monaco* with the Australian actress, Nicole Kidman, playing Princess Grace Kelly, and Tim Roth, Prince Rainier III of Monaco. The two married in 1956. The link between Dahan's work and Cannes is stronger than that in the case of *The Great Gatsby*. If Monaco is a principality within France and at nodding distance from Cannes, Hollywood star Grace Kelly met her Prince Charming for the first time during the Festival.

This was in May 1955 — when she headed the American delegation to Cannes. Invited by Rainier to his Monaco palace, Kelly was to walk with him in his garden and shake hands with him. And for the press, this was a wonderful photo opportunity. Nay, a great honour indeed, for Grace was an Oscar-winning actress (*The Country Girl*, 1954), and had worked for some legends like Alfred Hitchcock, John Ford, Charles Vidor and Fred Zinnemann.

And it was an equally great pride for the Festival, which was by then inching towards being the most glamorous cinema event in the world. But there was a hitch, which could have turned into a formidable obstacle.

Cannes suffered a horrible embarrassment in 1954. American actor Robert Mitchum was at the Festival, and on a sunny spring day, when he was on the beach, the shapely French starlet, Simone Sylva, had walked up to him and let her bikini top drop. Lensmen rushed to capture that, and a chivalrous Mitchum shielded her breasts with his hands.

The image was on the front pages of just about every paper the next day, and the Festival organisers — who then belonged to the conservative school and who regarded cinema as something sacred — asked Simone to leave Cannes. (Years later in 2011, a mortified Festival would ask Danish helmer Lars Von Trier — often described as the enfant terrible of European cinema — to leave town after his famous, though jocular, quip about being a Nazi sympathiser at a press conference — which followed the screening of his *Melancholia*. How prophetic the title was!)

The organisers felt that only someone like Kelly, who was regal and classy, could repair the damage. So she came, and was almost on the verge of cancelling her appointment with the Prince that May afternoon. But she did not do so on the advice of a friend. A thank you note sent to him after her brief encounter in his garden, attracted a reply — smitten as he was by the absolutely divine looking blonde, Grace.

Incidentally Kelly was seeing French actor Jean-Pierre Aumont

when she first met Rainier, but that did not stop the steady stream of letters between them. These deepened their fondness and love for each other. Grace had once said that she wanted to marry someone who did not feel belittled by her success, and the Prince was not. They were married in April 1956, less than a year after they had met on the French Riviera, a marriage dubbed as one of the century. It was certainly a fairy tale wedding.

(In an important way, Diana and Charles would replay it all decades later, their marriage also considered a fairy tale affair. Curiously, both marriages hit the rock. A disillusioned Diana looked the other way for affection, and so did Grace, who reportedly had a French lover in Paris.)

It is this post-marriage period of Kelly's life that Kidman will portray in *Grace of Monaco*. And not quite the years from 1950 to 1956, when she acted in 11 features — some as outstanding as *High Noon* with Gary Cooper (helmed by Zinnemann), Hitchcock's *Dial M for Murder* with Ray Milland, *Rear Window* (also Hitchcock, with James Stewart) and *The Swan* by Vidor and with Alec Guinness. Of course not to forget, George Seaton's *The Country Girl*.

The movie, *Grace of Monaco*, did lead to unpleasantness. Kelly's children, Prince Albert II, Princess Caroline and Princess Stephanie, called the film needlessly glamorised and historically inaccurate. "Therefore, the Royal Family wishes to stress that this movie in no way constitutes a biopic. It recounts one rewritten, needlessly glamorised page in the history of Monaco, and its family with both major historical inaccuracies, and a series of purely fictional scenes."

Soon after the shoot was wrapped up, Kidman told the French newspaper, *Le Figaro*, that the film was a character study. "This is not a biopic or a fictionalised documentary of Grace Kelly, but only a small part of her life where she reveals her great humanity as well as her fears, and weaknesses."

Later Dahan quipped, "I am not a journalist or historian. I am an artist. I have not made a biopic. I hate biopics in general. I have done, in any subjectivity, a human portrait of a modern woman who wants to reconcile her family, her husband, her career. But who will give up her career and invent another role. And it will be painful."

Will this "pain" move Cannes — particularly its no-nonsense critics?

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